

# Voices: Acknowledge, don't minimize trauma

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Hurt. Assault. Violence. Disaster. Loss. Grief. Death. Trigger. Trauma.

What is our initial reaction to each of these words?

The word "trauma" carries a lot of baggage in the form of warnings, assumptions and stereotypes. Each of us has experienced events in our lives that have left scars characterized by fear, harm or a myriad of other costs to our health and wellbeing.

We often have assumptions when others tell us of their trauma. We may be tempted to think others are overreacting or exaggerating, that "it couldn't have been *that* bad" or "they're just not thinking clearly." Perhaps we have minimized the accounts of others to avoid acknowledging the depth to which they have been affected.

We try to hurry others along in their healing process with the words, "Just get over it," so we can be comforted and protected with the false message, "Everything is OK," diminishing others' dignity and worth as they hear, "I am not worthy to be heard and seen as I am."

Maybe we have heard similar messages from others when trying to share our own stories.

Maybe we have imposed these messages upon ourselves.

## How Jesus addressed trauma

In contrast to the human inclination for self-preservation and the Western

ideal of efficiency, Jesus interacts intentionally and slowly with those in his path, with care for the created *imago dei* behind their presenting pain.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,” Jesus invites in Matthew 11:28.

Jesus does not brush aside the pain of the experiences in the lives of those around him. Rather, he acknowledges the bone-crushing weariness and the heaviness of the load many carry.

“And I will give you rest,” he said.

Note the absence of quick, easy healing, acceptability to others, or life free from flashbacks or costs.

“I will give you *rest*,” Christ promises—a rest that acknowledges the entirety of the burden that seems to encompass the one desperately seeking such relief, a rest that sees and loves the whole person beneath the load.

“Take up my yoke ... because I am lowly and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” Jesus added (Matthew 11:29-30).

Jesus continually refuses to allow the stigmas and stereotypes of the Judeo-Greco-Roman world to define his interactions with others. Whoever his audience or whatever his ministry, Jesus reinforced his narrative that each person is worthy of being heard and seen and loved, no matter how “difficult” their past.

He brings to the conversation no more stipulations, no more burdens, no more heavy loads, but rather humility and rest. He approaches us with a posture of humility (Philippians 2:5-7) and invites us to approach others in the same way. He does not hurry us toward minimization of our symptoms;

He embraces us in his healing arms.

## **How do we address trauma?**

Many of us would not hesitate to declare that everyone with whom we interact is created in the image of God and is deeply cared for by Christ. Yet how do our words and actions reflect this belief?

As Christ-followers—even as persons walking through life together—we need to listen to each unique story we encounter. However, the stories themselves do not make up the whole of the person.

To move beyond the assumption people can be known only by what has happened to them, we must take up the attitude of humility Christ exhibits to every marginalized or hurting person in his path.

In much the same way, we must examine our assumptions and biases and ask ourselves: “Do we present the same invitation as Christ does—for others to bring all of themselves into our churches, our practices, our lives, without judgment? Are we committed to changing the stereotypes surrounding trauma so people, indeed, can lay their burdens at the feet of Christ?”

Rather than desensitizing ourselves to the harms of this world, do we engage in practices that re-sensitize us to the pain others feel?

Do we actively avoid slang terms such as “trauma” and “trigger?”

Educating ourselves on the true definitions of such words and using them appropriately to describe the experiences of others or ourselves is a key step in presenting ourselves as humble listeners dedicated to creating truly safe spaces for everyone to process past hurts and future hopes in a beautiful, messy swirl of experiences.

Trauma is a burden we all bear. By acknowledging its presence in all our lives, perhaps we can work toward a society free of judgment and stereotypes.

With the lightness of Christ's burden solidifying our steps, may we consider our reactions to these words: Trauma. Love. Healing. Hope.

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